

Compassionate Holiness

BY JESSE C. MIDDENDORF



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FROM THE EARLIEST DAYS when Phineas F. Bresee and his followers committed themselves to minister in “the neglected quarters of the cities”* to the remarkable outpouring of generosity whenever news of a disaster breaks, Nazarenes historically have been a compassionate people. However, one mark of our concern for others is often overlooked.

Raising funds for disaster relief and human need is easy when Nazarenes are involved, but our compassion is not defined solely by our sacrificial and generous giving of money. And identifying who is poor and needy doesn’t even require a holy heart. Secular institutions and governments can figure out who is suffering, and CNN keeps us up-to-date on news of earthquakes and floods. It is easy to grieve over poverty and suffering—from a distance.

The most difficult part of holy compassion is not identifying the poor and suffering but identifying *with* them. We most genuinely take part in the Incarnation when we intensely and sacrificially identify with those who are suffering. In the act of touching the untouchable filth of the world we are most like the holy Christ.

Jesus was not afraid to touch the leper. He welcomed the unclean. He forgave and transformed the woman caught in the very act of adultery. His hands reached for those who were utterly repugnant to everyone else.

The Church of the Nazarene has benefited greatly from the disciplines of holy living. As we emphasize education and personal growth and development, our people grow. They discipline themselves to accumulate and to give, to care for their families and to provide for the work of the Church of Jesus Christ.

But our compassion must take a step closer to the need if we are to reflect the compassion of Christ. Giving our money from a

safe distance is not enough. We must give ourselves.

Sometimes compassion is not noble. Sometimes it requires the hard work of living out the love of God in the squalor and filth of a blighted slum where hopelessness abounds, poverty blinds, and fear and hatred thrive.

I have seen this kind of hard work up close and personal. I have seen some of our best and brightest young people give themselves in compassionate ministry on the front lines, often living in the very pockets of poverty and need where they desire to minister. I have seen veteran missionaries pour their lives out in ministry to the poorest of the poor, willingly embracing the most emaciated and broken to offer hope, kindness, food, clothing, and Jesus.

I have seen Work and Witness teams spend themselves in a community where disease, filth, and poverty are a stench that takes your breath away. With holy hearts and deep compassion, these godly, loving, often quite well-to-do Nazarenes embrace the ugliness of such places and in doing so convey the very love of Christ.

I have seen churches embrace HIV/AIDS victims, offering the love and acceptance of Christ and patiently ministering basic human care to helpless, hopeless people.

Holiness is not removed and aloof from human need. It finds its best expression in close and personal identification with those whose needs are greatest. And it does so with a singing heart, reflecting the power of the Holy Spirit in a transformed, grateful life. ♦

*Minutes of the organizational meeting of First Church of the Nazarene of Los Angeles, October 30, 1895.

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